



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

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MONTANA WOLF POPULATION GROWTH SLOWS IN 2009

At least 525 wolves inhabit Montana according to the 2009 annual wolf conservation and management report released today by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

FWP's report, which is available online at fwp.mt.gov, shows Montana's minimum wolf population increased about 4 percent in 2009, compared to an 18 percent increase in 2008.

The minimum Montana wolf population counts include 525 wolves, in 101 verified packs, and 37 breeding pairs. Montana's minimum pack count and number of breeding pairs increased slightly from 2008.

"The combination of a conservative harvest by hunters, agency control and other mortality sources did not curtail population growth," said FWP Director Joe Maurier.

Compared to Idaho and Wyoming, at 28 percent Montana had the highest rate of known human-caused mortality of wolves. Officials surmised that's due to Montana's wolf population, as a whole, living on a combination of public and private lands. Nonetheless, Montana's population still increased and remains well above recovery goals.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service delisted the northern Rocky Mountain's gray wolves in Montana, Idaho and parts of Washington, Utah and Oregon, but not in Wyoming, about a year ago. The decision is being challenged in Missoula federal court by several groups seeking to reinstate federal endangered species protections throughout the region.

The minimum recovery goal for wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains was set at a minimum of 30 breeding pairs—successfully reproducing wolf packs—and a minimum of 300 individual wolves for at least three consecutive years and well distributed throughout the recovery area. The goal was achieved in 2002, and the wolf population has increased every year since.

FWP's report is part of the annual federal recovery update required by USFWS. The end of 2009 count also estimates that at least 320 wolves inhabited Wyoming and at least 843 wolves inhabited Idaho. Annual reports from Idaho, Wyoming, and information about wolves in Yellowstone National Park and the northern Rockies as a whole are available online at <http://westerngraywolf.fws.gov>.

The northern Rockies' "metapopulation" is comprised of wolf populations in Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming. Three packs are now verified in Oregon and Washington. Today, at least 1,706 wolves in 242 packs, with about 115 breeding pairs, live in the region, where wolves can travel about freely to join existing packs or form new packs. This, combined with wolf populations in Canada and Alaska, assures genetic diversity.

Most of the increases in Montana's wolf population occurred in the northwest's Wolf Management Unit 1 where the population grew to 308 wolves, in 64 verified packs, and 23 breeding pairs. Seven of the packs reside on reservations where they are managed by Tribal authorities.

In western Montana's WMU 2, the minimum counts were similar to previous years—at least 110 wolves in 20 packs, and five breeding pairs. In southwestern Montana's WMU 3, minimum wolf counts showed a slight decline from 2008 to at least 106 wolves in 17 packs, and nine breeding pairs. Lethal control and decreased immigration from Yellowstone National Park may explain the population leveling off over the past few years.

"The rate of population growth continues to slow because the best habitats already have resident wolf packs," said Maurier said.

About 23 packs occur along Montana's border with Idaho, 14 of which are included in the Montana estimate. This demonstrates the continued influence of the robust wolf population in Idaho on Montana's wolf population.

The recovery of the wolf in the northern Rockies remains one of the fastest endangered species comebacks on record. In the mid 1990s, to hasten the overall pace of wolf recovery in the Northern Rockies, 66 wolves were released into Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho.

"Nearly all of Montana's wolves live outside national parks, which also means more intensive management is needed to strike the right balance between wolves and public acceptance," Maurier said. "It's very clear that Montana has made room for wolves."

Last year, Montana created a wolf hunt for the first time. Hunters harvested 72 wolves between Sept. 15 and Nov. 16. As hunters approached the overall harvest quota of 75 wolves,

FWP closed the hunt about two week before the general season was scheduled to end to ensure the quota would not be exceeded. In May, FWP will propose regulations, and most likely a higher harvest quota, for the 2010 wolf season.

Livestock depredations and response up in 2009

Despite the hunt—and with the increase in wolf depredation responses by FWP— wolf recovery continues to be accompanied by increases in both the number livestock killed by wolves and the number of wolves killed to resolve conflicts, as chronicled in the latest report. Of the 255 wolf deaths documented in 2009, 145 were related to livestock depredations, 16 were illegal kills, and vehicles or trains struck eight. Others died from a variety of causes common to all wildlife species, including poor health and old age.

Still, Maurier said the Montana wolf population grew by adding at least 166 new pups by the end of December and by establishing at least 26 new packs in 2009.

Cattle deaths confirmed by USDA Wildlife Services in Montana increased from 77 in 2007 to 97 in 2009, and confirmed sheep death losses nearly doubled from 111 to 202. About 38 percent of Montana wolf packs were confirmed to have killed livestock. Three wolf packs and lone wolves were responsible for nearly all confirmed sheep losses. Four llamas, two goats, and four dogs were also confirmed killed by wolves. Additional losses and injuries occurred, but either could not be verified or were determined to be "probable" wolf kills.

Maurier noted that of 145 wolves that were killed to prevent further depredations, private citizens killed 10 wolves caught chasing or attacking livestock. He said a variety of proactive nonlethal tools were also employed in cooperation with landowners to reduce the risk of loss. For example, FWP again collaborated in several range-rider projects and provided fladry—cloth or plastic flags that are attached to wire that can deter wolves from approaching an area—to numerous private landowners.

FWP has led wolf management under the federal guidelines since 2004. Delisting allows Montana to manage wolves in a manner similar to how bears, mountain lions and other wildlife species are managed, guided by state management plans, administrative rules, and laws.

To learn more about Montana's wolf population, visit FWP online at fwp.mt.gov/wolf. Click Montana Wolves.